

Montana/Dakotas BLM Access Initiative

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

To provide information on the Montana/Dakotas Access Initiative.

ISSUES:

Access to public lands is a high priority for the Montana/Dakotas BLM. The changing ownership of private lands and the subsequent blocking of access to public lands has, at times, created a critical access situation in Montana and the Dakotas. At the same time, there is significant community growth, decreasing access to many private lands, and increasing demand for access to public lands.

Over the past few years, our ability to acquire public access to BLM-managed lands has decreased substantially due to the loss of BLM realty positions, a lack of funds, and an increasing workload. We are developing a course of action that will emphasize the importance of access and accelerate our ability to create more public access to BLM lands in the three states.

BACKGROUND:

BLM Montana State Director Gene Terland and Associate State Director Howard Lemm have identified access to public lands as a high priority for Montana/Dakotas. In January 2008, they directed the State Management Team to form a committee to examine access issues and make recommendations. The committee met with various government and non-government organizations and developed recommendations.

To achieve a proactive access program, we must: 1) utilize a variety of methods to acquire public access including land exchanges, fee acquisition, easements, right-of-way negotiations for reciprocal public access, Block Management, etc.; 2) utilize a number of tools such as BLM staff, BLM retirees, partnerships, contracts, volunteers, land trusts, and funding sources such as the Federal Land Transaction Facilitation Act funds, etc., to secure public access; and 3) have a BLM staff member dedicated to addressing issues related to access to BLM-managed public lands.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM in Montana and the Dakotas is being proactive in the access arena. To improve our ability to create more public access to BLM lands in the three states, we're adding an access program manager to our state office staff in Billings. This new team member will bring components of traditional BLM programs together to achieve many of our access goals. Likewise, the access program manager will maintain a repository of access concerns so that needs and solutions can be matched as opportunities arise. We expect this position to be filled by summer 2009.

We recognize the need for public access to public lands is not exclusive to BLM, and we will work to secure partnerships with our sister federal agencies, state and local entities as well as private organizations interested in improving access. Access needs are diverse. In some cases, agencies may merely need to blur jurisdictional lines in order to better meet the public's access needs. Other circumstances can be unique and will likewise demand unique and innovative solutions. Sometimes we may need to work with third party partners or develop alternative funding strategies. At other times, we may need to devise flexible ways to work with willing sellers to acquire land or easements through outright acquisition, land exchanges, or donation. We hope that our renewed efforts will serve as incentive for other organizations to join us and that the public will reap the benefits for years to come.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

Montana/Dakotas BLM believes that it is imperative that we proactively address the issue of public access on BLM lands in Montana/Dakotas.

CONTACT:

Cindy Staszak, Chief, Branch of Land Resources, (406) 896-5039